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ABSTRACT

A study investigated Koreans' use and misuse of the English passive, from a pragmatic perspective, with attention to the possible source of errors. Subjects were 200 college students at two universities in Korea who were English majors or minors or taking English as an elective course, divided equally between sophomores and juniors. The subjects wrote argumentative essays in English about one of two scientific topics selected to elicit passive usage. Essays were analyzed for pragmatic errors in use of the passive, either discourse functional errors (violation of role prominence or violation of defocusing) or emotional functional errors related to the Korean prevalence of the emotional function of the passive. Results indicate that more emotional than functional discourse errors occurred, suggesting negative transfer, and that despite the relative similarity of the discourse functions in Korean and English, Korean learners did make discourse functional errors, possibly due to erroneous assumptions about the English passive and active voices and possibly due to the sociocultural factor of prestige. There also appeared to exist a hierarchy of acceptability of pragmatic errors. Contains 9 references. The essay writing assignment is appended. (MSE)

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A Pragmatic Analysis of English Passives in Second Language Acquisition[1]

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This paper investigates how Korean learners use the English passive in pragmatic perspective. To this end, a large number of data were collected from an essay writing task. It is shown that there are more emotional functional errors than discourse functional errors, which suggests that pragmatic transfer occurs. Of particular interest is that a socio-cultural factor, *prestige*, serves an important factor to account for the errors. Another important finding is that there exists a hierarchy of acceptability of discourse functional errors.

Little attention has been paid to functional aspects of the passive in second language acquisition. Watabe et al. (1991) explored native language interference in the use of the passive by Japanese learners of English and English learners of Japanese. however, their study is not satisfactory. For example, they do not examine the cases the passive was unnaturally used where the active is appropriate, which is an important aspect of functional analysis of the passive. Furthermore, they did not allow for the degrees of naturalness in discourse functional errors, disregarding the fact that some pragmatic errors are more unacceptable than others.

This paper investigates how Korean learners use the English passive in pragmatic perspective: how they follow or violate pragmatic principles in the use of the English passive. I also examine the possible sources of the errors, with particular attention to the influence of the native language.

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Functions of the Passive in English and Korean

Before examining Korean students' use of English passives, it is important to review the functions of the passive in the native and target languages. There is a relative similarity in discourse functions of the passive between the two languages, since the passive can be best understood in terms of the concept of *role prominence* in both English and Korean (Jung 1996). According to role-prominence analysis, the passive is preferred when the patient is "at the center of events in the situation being described" (Riddle & Sheintuch 1983:546). This makes clear that the selection of the active or the passive depends upon whether or not the subject plays a prominent role in the given situation. Consider:

(1) I was born a few months after he [my father] shipped out to Saipan, and I grew accustomed to being spoiled by a tight maternal clan of mother, grandmother and a half-dozen aunts. My father's return when I was almost three disrupted that. (*Reader's Digest, p.101, March, 1990*)

Here at the center of attention is "I," since the situation describes how "I" was treated by a maternal clan. If the active were used instead of the underlined passive sentence, the situation would be described from the point of view of the maternal clan, who is doing something to "I." For this reason, the passive is used where the patient plays a prominent role.

Role prominence analysis also has explanatory power for the Korean passive. Consider the following example:

(2) Hankwuk-ul pangmwunhal-ttaymata na-lul
Korea-OM visit -whenever me-OM

tanghwang-khe ha-nun kes-un kongcung pyenso-ey
embarrass- CAUS -REL-thing-TOP public restroom-in

hywuci-ka pichi-toy-ci anhko isstanunteyissta.
toilet paper provide-**PASS**-not is

'Whenever (I) visit Korea, the thing that embarrasses me is that in the public restrooms toilet paper is not provided.' (Kim Ockyo Essay, *Hoicenmokma 'Merry-go-round*)

This example is accounted for in terms of role prominence, in the sense that the subject "toilet paper" is role prominent, with little attention to "whoever provide the toilet paper," because the speaker is mainly concerned with the obejct to be provided.

In this study, I accept Riddle and Sheintuch's role prominence analysis. However, other pragmatic notions such as topic will also be used, since role prominence and topic are not mutually exclusive, but rather interact with each other. In order to judge a redundant use of the by-phrase, the notion of defocusing is used, since the by-phrase is preferably defocused when it is unimportant or unnecessary.

Unlike the similarity in discourse functions of the passive, there is a significant difference in emotional (affective) function, either adversative or favorable. Emotional function of the passive is much more pervasive in Korean than in English (Jung 1996). Several related studies (e.g. Lakoff 1971, Chappell 1980) have shown that in English emotional function is limited to the GET-passive, which is frequently used to reflect the attitude of the speaker toward the events described in the sentence.

In contrast, Davison (1980) found that Korean lexical passives more consistently convey an adversative or favorable effect.

However, affective function is not limited to lexical passive but is reflected in all types of the passive including the affix passive, as in the following examples:

(3) Tom-un kyengchal-eykey son-ul cap-hi-essta.
Tom-TOP police-by hand-OM catch-**PASS**-PAST
'Tom is subject to his hand being caught by the police.'

(4) Na-nun palam-ey sso-i-le ka-ssta.
I-TOP wind-by blow-**PASS**-to go-PAST
Literally: 'I went out to be blown by breeze.'
Intended: 'I went out to enjoy by breeze.'

Example (3) is an adversity passive since the patient of the passive is adversely affected, whereas example (4) is favorably affected.

It is, therefore, assumed that a relative similarity in discourse functions and a significant difference in emotional function between English and Korean passives may have a great effect on Korean students' use of the English passive.

Method

The data were obtained from college students in Korea who were English majors or minors or who were taking English as an elective: English education students and English literature students at Yeungnam University; and English literature students at Dongguk University.

Two proficiency levels were considered: sophomore and junior. The number of informants was equally divided with 100 in each proficiency level. Thus, the total number of informants was 200 students: 100 sophomores and 100 juniors.

An essay-writing task was conducted as a class assignment. The informants were asked to write an argumentative essay about one of two assigned scientific topics -- either an environmental problem or computer technology (the sample of this task is attached in the appendix). These two topics -- in particular, the environmental problem -- were assumed to be very useful for examining native language interference, because the affective (adversative) function of the Korean passive is likely to be shown when Korean students express their subjective feelings on misfortunate events such as environmental problems.

I then determined pragmatic naturalness of each passive with the cooperation of proficient native speakers/writers of English. A statistical analysis is provided.

Analysis

The pragmatic errors basically fall into two categories: discourse functional errors and emotional functional errors. These two types are further sub-categorized, depending on the degree of naturalness.

1. Discourse functional errors

Discourse functional errors include violation of role prominence and violation of defocusing.

1.1. Violation of role prominence: Violation of role prominence is the case where the use of the passive is unnatural and thus the active is preferred.

First, consider a very unusual use of the passive (5 occurrences), which violates the notion of role prominence:

(5) I think that among all kinds of problems, the environment pollution is most serious, because we, our lives and our bodies depend on environment perfectly. If environment is the bad condition, also we will be in the bad condition. If environment is hurt by us, we will be hurt by environment. It is clear that we have very close relationship with environment, and we and environment are not two seperated things. (Junior #10)

In this example, the first-person was used as the agent of the passive sentence, but it is very unusual to use the first person as the agent of the passive in English. Thus, the active sentence is preferred. The first person pronoun is considered to play a prominent role. The use of the active sentence makes the whole context more effective and cohesive, thereby enhancing the communicative effect.

Still unnatural but a little less so than the above example is the case of an abrupt topic shift (28 occurrences):

(6) However, T.V. has negative aspect. In particular, T.V. influence children very much. For example, my nephew imitates what he saw in the T.V.If he see a soldier in the T.V., he imitates soldiers's behavior. If he see a singer, he imitates his singing. If he see a boxing game, he imitates boxer. One day, he saw boxing game and go out side. One child in the neighborhood was hit by him because my nephew make gesture like boxer. This case shows T.V. influence children very much. (Sophomore #72)

(7) Indirect pollution means that pollution comes from other countries. For example, one terrible accident which we were surprised is nuclear plant exploision in Soviet Union long time ago. When nuclear plant exploided, pollutants came to East Asian countries including Korea. (Sophomore #23)

In example (7), the topic was abruptly shifted from "my nephew" to

"one child in the neighborhood," with no particular reason. Here the writer talks about "my nephew" rather than "one child." This suggests that "my nephew" plays a prominent role in the given situation, which in turn suggests that the role-prominence NP is eligible to be placed in the subject position. The active sentence is more natural than the passive sentence since it is in accordance with role-prominence and it facilitates the topic.

In a similar vein, the unnaturalness of the passive in example (7) is due to a topic continuity problem. Here the passive sentence is not impossible if the preposition <u>at</u> is added to the verb. However, the use of the active sentence makes the context more cohesive, because our attention is on "accident" rather than on "we." The passive sentence in this example is a little less unnatural than in the previous examples. This fact suggests that there exists a hierarchy of acceptability of the pragmatic errors.

Consider another example of the topic shift problem:

(8) In addition, computers bring about many benefits. First, rockets such as Discovery <u>is controlled</u> by computers. Second, difficult methematical questions can <u>be calculated</u> by computers. Third, computers can check up patient's problems. Fourth, a huge number of data can <u>be analyzed</u> by computers, Fifth, computers can draw pictures and charts. Besides, computers will guide directions to strangers. As shown above, computers are very useful in our life. (Sophomore #68)

In this example the passive sentences were used where the active sentences are preferable. The writer interchanges voice by using the active in some cases and the passive in others. Such an interchangeable use of voice pattern discontinues the topic.

The learner seems to have used different voice forms simply to give variety, under the erroneous assumption that the passive sentence can be used interchangeably with the active sentence. In reality, the consistent use of active sentences provides greater cohesion and conveys information more effectively in accordance with information structures such as topic-comment structures.

On the other hand, there are a couple of examples where the passive is pragmatically in accordance with role-prominence, but it is stylistically unnatural and thus the active is preferred:

(9) By the way, I talked about the positive means of high technology. Difficult to define what I have refer as all H.T. (High Technology). As you guess, from now the side of negative direction should be written down.
(Junior #53)

Since the writer used an active sentence in talking about the positive aspect of high technology, it would be better to use the active sentence for the underlined passive sentence in turning to the negative aspect of high technology. The parallel use of the active sentence makes the organization more systematic.

1.2. Violation of defocusing: The by-phrase of the passive is preferably deleted when unimportant or unnecessary. When the by-phrase is supposed to be deleted, but is not, it violates the notion of defocusing. Defocusing errors thus involve cases where the passive is natural in accordance with role prominence, but the by-phrase is unnatural in terms of defocusing principles. In this respect, the use of the passive in violation of defocusing is less unnatural than that in violation of role-prominence.

Like role-prominence errors, defocusing errors show different degrees of naturalness. First, consider a highly unnatural use of the by-phrase in the passive (8 occurrences):

(10) To solve those problem, we have to be conscious of an inseparable relation to each other, human and nature. after this fundamental attitude for nature, we must demand a positive endeavor in practical life. When environmental disruption is regarded as a kind of disaster by ourselves, we are stood the core which must solve this problem. (Junior #59)

In this example, the passive sounds fine, but the by-phrase is very unnatural because of the fact that it is very unusual in English to use the first person pronoun and/or the reflexive pronoun as the by-phrase in the passive.

Another case where the passive is fine, but the by-phrase is quite unnatural, is the use of a generic noun as the agent (5 occurrences):

(11) Nowadays our environment is demaged seriously by people but we must try to remember that our lives and environment are all connected. (Sophomore #29)

Here, the by-phrase is unnatural since our common knowledge or situational context makes us assume that it is people who damage the environment. It is more natural to defocus the by-phrase in favor of the agentless passive.

A similar but somewhat different case arises when either the active or the passive sounds fine, but the by-phrase is highly unnatural (3 occurrences):

(12) In the newspaper, I read a big news about one bad owner of factory. Thus person managed dye factory, and thus he used much water for dye and then the polluted water was discharged by him secretly into river because he had to spend much money to clean up the waste water.
(Sophomore #60)

The unnaturalness of the passive depends upon two kinds of interpretations. If the writer means that the factory owner himself discharged the polluted water rather than ordering somebody to do it, then the active is more natural than the passive in accordance with role-prominence and topic chaining. However, if the writer means that the factory owner ordered someone else to do it, then the passive is fine, but the use of the by-phrase is inappropriate. Moreover, it puts too much focus on the agent. Since the factory owner is mentioned as the agent in the preceding actives, use of the passive here causes an expectation that the agent of the discharging is different, and inclusion of the by-phrase puts focus on that agent as somehow different, when it is not.

Still unnatural but a little less so than the above uses of the by-phrase are those cases where the passive sounds fine, but it would be better without the by-phrase (26 occurrences):

(13) In Korea, the government take new policy to prevent pollution. That is, it told people to use vinyle to collect trashes. If people who throw away trashes without using vinyles is found by someone, they will be punished by the court. This policy is sometimes problem but usually it is helpful to reduce pollution problem.
(Junior #46)

Here, the use of the by-phrase is neither normal nor necessary, and thus the passive would be better without the by-phrase.

An example of the peculiar use of the by-phrase is found where

the by-phrase makes a non-human agent too agentive:

(14) The early style of the computer was very simple. As time goes on, the computer was developed very fast, and not even artificial intelligence computer was developed. The computer brought human to the convenience. Most of the systems in office are operated by the computer. People became to be lazy and to feel powerlessness. The computer is spreaded into plenty of realms of people. (Sophomore #72)

In this example the use of the by-phrase makes the non-human agent too human and too conscious. Such an awkwardness may be avoided if the verb is rewritten as "are computerized."

In contrast to the above cases where the by-phrase is over-used, there is an example in which the agent (or the active subject) is inappropriately defocused. In other words, the by-phrase was sometimes deleted where it is necessary:

(15) Environmental pollution is terribly harmful. It kills fish and other things in the sea. It sometimes damage crops and soils. In addition, as a result, diseases, terribly bad diseases is caused. (Sophomore #23)

There are two ways to make the above example more natural. The first is to remove the phrase "as a result" and add the by-phrase, "by environmental pollution." The second is to use a different active verb form, "result." The second one is preferable.

Various types of defocusing errors we have seen so far are incongruent with the fact that the agentive passive is far less frequently used than the agentless passive.

2. Emotional functional errors: Emotional functional errors are those caused because of the possible interference of the native

language which is characterized as the prevalence of emotional (or affective) function of the passive.

The prevalence of the emotional function of the Korean passive leads the Korean students to use the English passive form even when it is not supposed to be used. There are a large number of passive forms which were influenced by an adversative emotional interpretation (158 occurrences). Consider:

(16) We can find the good example of pollution in our society. Thta is, an oil spil by oil tanker which have been happened in our sea a few months ago. (Sophomore #8)
(17) Frankly speaking, I didn't realize the pollution of environment is in danger because I have no difficulty in existing. But last time, due to pollution of water when many people in Taegue was suffered much pain. I was shocked. (Sophomore #61)
(18) The vegetation that supply oxygen to human get dry and the fish that play quite freely in the river get died. (Junior #62)

A common case of emotional functional errors is the passivization of the intransitive verbs happen and occur (42 occurrences). The error in example (16) may be because the learner, having a negative attitude toward the situation described, might think that the subject was adversely affected by the action of the verb.

Similarly, in examples (17) and (18), the passive form was erroneously used to express the writers' sympathy with the respective subjects, many people in Taegue and fish. That is, the writers' feelings are projected upon these subjects with the passive forms.

There are also cases where the passive form was influenced by a favorable emotional interpretation (24 occurrences), as opposed to an adversative one:

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(19) Humans have <u>been lived</u>, depending on the benefits of nature as a part of environment. Nature gives men many kinds of resources and is purged debris originated from human being's livelihood. Our forefather <u>are lived</u> and harmonized with the nature. (Sophomore #96)

The patients of the passives are favorably affected; the writer seems to have a positive view of the situation described. This clearly shows that the emotional function of the Korean passive, which influences the students' use of the English passive, is not limited to the adversative passive. The emotional connotation can be positive as well as negative, depending upon the context.

Results and Discussion

I have analyzed pragmatic errors according to various sub-categories. The sub-categories are divided largely into two main categories: discourse functional errors and emotional functional errors. The discourse functional errors include violation of role prominence and defocusing, mainly because they are based on the degree of naturalness in discourse contexts.

Discourse functional errors are distinguished from emotional functional errors for two reasons. First, the former depend upon discourse contexts, and the latter depend on emotional feelings. Second, discourse functional errors and emotional functional errors can be compared in terms of the similarities and differences of the target language and the native language. Specifically, the discourse functions of the passive regarding role prominence and defocusing are relatively similar in both English and Korean. But there is a particular emotional function of the passive in Korean

which does not exist in English.

The total for pragmatic errors was 259 or 35% of the total passives used (732). These pragmatic errors are compared in terms of proficiency levels:

Table 1. The Results of Pragmatic Errors by Proficiency Levels

	Sophomore	Junior	Total
Pragmatic errors	117 (34%)	142 (36%)	259 (35%)
Total passives used	340	392	732

$Z = .566$ $p = .472$

Table 1 shows that juniors made slightly more pragmatic errors than sophomores, but the difference is not statistically significant. In other words, sophomores and juniors made a similar proportion of pragmatic errors. This result is not in accordance with the normal expectation that more advanced learners are less likely to make errors than less advanced learners.

This result may be explained in terms of a socio-cultural factor, prestige; Korean students generally consider the passive sentence more prestigious than the corresponding active sentence, reflecting greater skill in their command of English. Thus, juniors seem to have over-used the passive sentence to show their greater skill, without considering pragmatic principles. In fact, in Korean ESL classrooms, the use of as many passive as possible is viewed by students or sometimes by teachers as a criterion to determine whether the learner is proficient or not. Thus, the learners

sometimes intentionally use the passive where it is unnecessary or where the active is more natural.

Consider the pragmatic errors in terms of functional differences:

Table 2. Pragmatic Errors by Functional Differences

Discourse functional errors	77 (30%)
Emotional functional errors	182 (70%)
Total functional errors	259
$Z = 13.067$	$p < .0001$

Table 2 indicates that there are more emotional functional errors than discourse functional errors. The difference is statistically significant. This is understandable when we consider the fact that a significant difference exists between the English and Korean passives in terms of emotional connotation, but a relative similarity exists in the discourse function. The errors influenced by emotional functional differences reflect Kasper's point (1992) that "non-native speakers' comprehension and production of linguistic action is considerably influenced by their L1 pragmatic knowledge."

Emotional functional errors can be considered negative transfer. Negative transfer may impede language learning in that the native language may "delay the restructuring of a language learner's rule" (Gass 1988). This viewpoint supports Schachter's (1994) new account of language transfer as a *constraint* [emphasis mine] imposed by previous knowledge, rather than as a process. Previous knowledge may constrain any cognition or concepts learners

want to form about the target language.

Despite the relative similarity of the discourse functions in English and Korean, the Korean learners did make discourse functional errors. This result can be interpreted in two ways. First, it may stem in part from the Korean students' erroneous assumption that the English active and the passive are merely paraphrases of the same thing or simple derivations of the same thing, and they thus feel free to use both voice patterns without considering pragmatic principles. The second involves the socio-cultural factor, prestige. As just mentioned, the Korean learners seem to use the more prestigious voice pattern, the passive, irrespective of the pragmatic principles. The use of the passive is considered to be an important norm for distinguishing good ESL writers from poor ones in Korea. This fact strongly suggests that Korean learners need to be taught how to use the passive in accordance with pragmatic principles. The functional aspects of the passive will provide an important key to understanding communicative intent.

Another significant finding of the functional approach in this study is that there exists a hierarchy of acceptability of pragmatic errors:

-The passive is very unnatural and thus the active is preferred;
-The passive is not impossible, but the active is preferred;
-The passive is fine, but the by-phrase is highly unnatural;
-The passive is fine, but the by-phrase is slightly unnatural, etc.

Such a multi-level approach strongly suggests that we have to allow

for degrees of naturalness or acceptability of pragmatic errors. Such an approach contributes to second language acquisition, helping the teacher to understand that some errors are more natural than others and to decide which item he/she has to pay more or less attention to, facilitating effective syllabus design.

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NOTES

1. This paper is a revised version of paper presented at the Tenth Annual International Conference on Pragmatics and Language Learning, March 21-23, 1996, University of Illinois at Urbaba Champaign.
This paper is also a part of the author's Ph.D. dissertation, entitled "A Grammatical and Pragmatic Analysis of English Passives in Second Language Acquisition."

2. Abbreviations used in this paper: TOP = Topic marker, OM = Object marker, PAST = Past marker, PASS = Passive marker, CAUS = Causative marker, REL = Relative marker.

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Appendix -- Essay writing assignment

Write an argumentative essay about one of the following two topics.

Choose *one of the two topics* and write *2 or 3 pages*:

1. Discuss the problem of pollution in your country or in the world (for example, *air pollution, water pollution*). Describe the problem in detail with relevant examples. You may include, for example:

why the problem of pollution is serious;
what causes this problem;
what the results of this problem could be;
how this problem could be solved.

2. Discuss both the positive and negative aspects of high technology, for example, *computers*. You may consider, for example:

how the situation was before computers were used;
how much computers have developed;
(Do you think they should be developed further?)
how computers contribute to the quality of human life;
how other industries are influenced by computers;
what the limitations of computers are.